

The Bronze Bell

By Louis Joseph Vance



Labertouche followed and with the aid of a small electric pocket lamp discovered another socket for the lever. A moment later the slab moved back into place. Labertouche shuffled. "Come along," he said, and drew ahead at a snail's pace.

They passed down a passage that seemed at a moment's glance through solid rock. Now and again it turned and struck away in another direction. Once they descended—or rather fell down—a short, steep flight of steps. At the bottom, Amber stopped.

"Lead on," he cried.

Labertouche pulled up impatiently.

"What's the matter?"

"Sophia!"

"Trust me, dear boy, and come along."

It was some time later that Labertouche extinguished his lamp and threw a low word of warning over his shoulder. Synchronously Amber discerned, far ahead, a faint glow of yellow light. As they bore down upon it with unmoderated speed he could see that it emanated from a rough-hewn doorway, opening off the passage.

Labertouche pushed Amber on ahead. Stopping the Virginian entered a small, rude chamber hollowed out of the rock of Kattapur. A crude lamp in a bracket furnished all its illumination, flaring with a sickly red glow. Amber was vaguely aware of the figures of two women—one standing in a corner, the other seated dejectedly upon a charpoy, her head against the wall. As he lifted his head after passing under the low lintel, the woman in the corner fixed at him point-blank.

The Virginian saw the jet of flame spurt from her hand and felt the bullet's impact upon the wall behind his head. He flung himself upon her instantly. There was a moment of furious struggle, while the cell echoed with the reverberations of the shot and the screaming of the woman on the charpoy. The pistol exploded again as he grappled with the would-be murderer; the bullet, passing up his sleeve, crossed his left arm as with a white-hot iron, and tore out through the cloth on his shoulder. He twisted brutally the wrist that held the weapon, and the woman dropped it with a cry of pain.

"You would!" he cried, and threw her from him, putting a foot upon the pistol.

She recoiled back against the wall and crouched there, trembling, her cheeks on fire, her eyes aflame with rage.

"You dog!" she shrieked in Hindi—and spat at him like a madwoman. Then she recognized him.

"Narain!" He stepped back in his surprise, his right hand seeking instinctively the wrist of his left, which was numb with pain.

His change of position left the pistol unguarded, and the woman crept down upon it like a bird of prey; but before she could get her fingers on the grip, Labertouche stepped between them, fished her off, and quietly possessed himself of the weapon.

"Your pardon, madam," he said, gravely.

Narain retreated, shaking with fury, and Amber employed the respite to recognize Sophia Farrell in the woman on the charpoy. She was still seated, prevented from rising by bonds about her wrists and ankles, and though unnaturally pale, her anguish of fear and despair had set its marks upon her face without one whit detracting from the appeal of her beauty. He went to her immediately, and as their eyes met, her flames with joy, relief and her dazed believe—a stronger emotion.

"You—you're not hurt, Mr. Amber?"

"Not at all. The bullet went out through my sleeve. And you?"

He dropped on his knees, with his pocket-knife severing the ends of rope that bound her.

"I'm all right," she took his hands, helping herself to rise. "Thank you," she said, her eyes shining, a flush of color suffusing her face with glory.

"Did you cut those ropes, Amber?"

Labertouche interposed curtly.

"Yes, why?"

The Englishman explained without turning from his sombre and morose regard of Narain. "Too bad—we'll have to tie this woman up, somehow. She's a complication I hadn't foreseen."

"Here, you'd better leave me to attend to her—you and Miss Farrell. Go on down the gallery—to the left. I'll catch up with you."

The pistol which he still held fast to his demand a sinister significance of which he was, perhaps, thoughtful. But Sophia Farrell heard, saw and understood.

"No!" she cried, going swiftly to the secret agent. "No!" She put a hand upon his arm, but he brushed it off.

"Did you hear me, Amber?" said Labertouche, still watching the woman.

"Yes, but you won't do it!" cried Sophia.

"That's no use for Miss Farrell. Miss Farrell," Labertouche said to her, "you'd better leave me to the woman—Mr. Amber, you're mine. Please go."

"You wouldn't let me leave her?"

"Amber!" cried the Englishman, indignantly. "Will you?"

"Please, Miss Farrell," begged Amber, trying to take the girl's hand and draw her away.

"I won't!" she declared. "I'll stay with her until she's safe."

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"She's a good incarnate," Labertouche broke in. "Amber, get that girl!"

"She's my sister!" cried Sophia.

"Now will you understand?"

"What?" The two men exclaimed at once.

"She's my sister," she repeated, holding up her head defiantly, her cheeks burning—"my sister by adoption. We were brought up together. She was the daughter of an old friend of my father's—an Indian prince. A few years ago she ran away—"

"Thank God!" said Amber from the bottom of his soul; and, "Ah, you would!" cried Labertouche tensely, as Narain seized the opportunity, when his attention was momentarily diverted, to break for freedom.

Amber saw the flash of a steel blade in the woman's hand as she struck at the secret agent, and the latter, stepping back, deflected the blow with a guarding forearm. Then, with the quickness of a snake, Narain stooped, glided beneath his arms, and slipped from the cell.

With a smothered oath Labertouche leaped to the doorway, lifting his pistol; but he was no quicker than Sophia, who caught his arm and held him back. "No," she panted; "not even for our lives—not at that price!"

He yielded unexpectedly. "Of course you are perfectly right, Miss Farrell," said he, with a little bow. "I'm sorry that circumstances . . . But come! She'll have this hornet's nest about our ears in a brace of seconds. Hark to that!"

A long, shrill shriek echoed down the gallery. Labertouche shrugged and turned to the left. "Come along," he said. "Amber, take Miss Farrell's hand and keep close to me." He led the way from the cell at a brisk pace—one, indeed, that taxed Sophia's powers of endurance to maintain.

At length they stood on a low, pebbly ledge, just outside the black maw of the passage—an entrance hidden in a curtain-like fold in the face of the cliff that towered above them, casting an ink-black shadow. But beyond it the embazoned armament glowed brilliant, and at their feet the encircling waters ran, a broad ribbon of black stilling between the cliff and the opening shore, where a thicket of tamarisks rose, a black and ragged wall, like a rampart, to the sea.

Labertouche strode off into the water, "Straight ahead," he commanded; "don't waver—don't move until I bid you do the work. I've never failed on the other side."

"Narain!" Amber interrupted. "Look, however, man, you've just—"

"No—look!" Labertouche called briskly. "Where'd I look when I saw Narain?" He was taking care to let the girl see.

"Come along. What're you waiting for? Don't you know?" He turned to see the girl looking through with fixed stare. "Oh," he said in an accent of understanding, and came back. "If you'll help me, Amber, I dare say we can get Miss Farrell across without a wetting."

He offered to clasp hands with the Virginian and so make a seat; but Amber had a happier thought.

"I think I can manage by myself, thank you—if Miss Farrell will trust me."

His eyes met the girl's, and in hers he read trust and faith unending; he was conscious of a curious fluttering in his bosom.

"Trust you!" she said, with a little, broken laugh, and gave herself freely to his arms.

Labertouche grunted and turned his back, wading out into the stream with a great splash.

Amber straightened up, holding her very close to him, and that with ease. Had she been thrice as heavy he could have borne her with as little care as he did his own immeasurably lightened heart in that hour of fulfillment. The further bank neared all too quickly. He would willingly have lingered to prolong the stolen sweetness of that moment, forgetful altogether of the danger that lay behind him.

Ahead he saw Labertouche step out upon a shelving shore and, shaking his legs with an effort irresistibly suggestive of a dog leaving the water, peer inland through the tamarisks. His low, whistled signal sounded as Amber joined him and put down the girl—reluctantly. Her whispered thanks were interrupted by an exclamation from Labertouche.

"Hang it all!" he can't have mistaken the spot. I told him to wait right here, and now . . . We haven't delayed. He can't see apprehensive glances across the stream. "Look, Amber, please."

He considered a way through the tamarisks, and for several moments they struggled on through the blinding fog, seaward, their passage betrayed by their heavy rustling. Then, as they went through to open ground, Labertouche paused, and, without a moment's delay, starting eagerly from right to left, "I'm blocked!" he declared, with a vehemence that again his descriptor stronger language. "This is bad—bad—bad! He never failed me before!"

Amber's thought seemed to break from the ground at that point, and he saw the flash of a steel blade in the woman's hand as she struck at the secret agent, and the latter, stepping back, deflected the blow with a guarding forearm. Then, with the quickness of a snake, Narain stooped, glided beneath his arms, and slipped from the cell.

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Labertouche swore outright, needless; and Amber put himself before her, drawing his revolver, heartick with the conviction that they were trapped, that their labor had gone all for naught, that all futilely had they schemed and dared.

But while his finger was yet seeking the trigger the first shadow was joined by a score of fellows—shades that materialized with the swiftness and silence from the surface of the earth—and before he could level the weapon Labertouche seized his wrist. For an instant he resisted, raging with disappointment; but the Englishman was cool, strong, determined; inevitably in the outcome the weapon was pointed to the sky.

"Steady, you ass!" breathed the secret agent in his ear. "Can't you see—"

And Amber gave over, in amazement unbounded, seeing the starlight glinting down a dozen leveled rifle-barrels, glowing pale, on the spined, rounded crowns of pith helmets, and striking soft fire from burnished accoutrements; while a voice, thick with a brogue that was never bred out of hearing of Bow Bells, was hectoring them to surrender.

"And up, ye bloomin' black beggars! 'And up, I say!'"

"Tommy!" cried Amber; and incontinently he dropped the revolver as though it had turned hot in his hand.

"Steady, my man!" Labertouche interrupted what threatened to develop into a string of intolerable abuse. "Hold your tongue! Can't you see we're a lady with us?"

"U-uh!" The soldier lowered his rifle and stepped closer, his voice vibrating with astonishment. "Blimey, ere's a go! . . . beggar of a nigger givin' me wotfor 's 'f 'e was a gent! 'Oo in 'ell d'ye think y'are, yer ighness?"

"That'll do. Put down those guns, and call your commanding officer. I'll explain to him. Where is he? What troops are you? When did you arrive?"

"What's this?" A sharp voice cut the comments of the Tommies, and they were smitten silent by it. An officer, with jingling spurs and sword in hand, elbowed through the heart of the press. "Stop that row instantly. What's this? Who are you, sir?"

"I sent the message from Kattapur, and I'm uncommonly happy to meet you, whoever you may be, sir. Tell your men to fall back, please, and I'll introduce myself properly."

Two words secured the secret agent the privacy he desired; the officer offered him an ungloved hand as the troopers withdrew out of hearing.

"Happy, indeed!" he said cheerfully. "I'm Rowan, captain, Fourteenth platoon."

"I'm Labertouche, I. S. S. This is Miss Farrell, daughter of Colonel Farrell, and this Mr. Amber of New York. We've just escaped from that rock over there—and if you'd pardon me, I'd suggest you get someone to guard your back behind these tamarisks."

"One moment, please." The officer made off to make arrangements in accordance with Labertouche's advice.

"We got here only a quarter of an hour ago," he explained, shaking back his long hair, and looking back at the men who had followed him into the thicket, "and haven't had time to pace out the lay of the land thoroughly."

From the end of a short chapter of vague interrupted. The officer looked up his scabbard. "Sounds as if my men had gathered in somebody else," he said hastily. "If you'll excuse me, I'll have a look." He trotted off into the shade of the tamarisks.

As he disappeared the disturbance abated somewhat. "False alarm," Amber guessed.

"I fancy not," said Labertouche. "If I'm not mistaken our friend Narain left for the special purpose of raising the hue and cry. This should be the vanguard of the pursuit."

Amber looked upward. Overhead the soulless city slumbered in a stillness apparently unbroken, yet he who saw its profile rugged against the stars, could fancy what consternation was then, or presently would be, running riot through its haunted ways.

"How many of 'em are there, do you reckon?" he asked.

"Three or four hundred," replied the secret agent absently; "the pick and sower of Indian unrest. My word, but this will kick up a row! Think of it, man! three hundred and fifty-odd lords and princes bugged all at once in the act of plotting the Second Mutiny! What a change it will work on the political face of the land! . . . And the best of it is, they simply can't get away."

Amber was thinking with vindictive relish of what fate he would mete out to the manipulator of the Bell, were it left to him to pass sentence. But he broke off as a body of soldiery burst from the tamarisks, and, headed by young Rowan, hurried toward the three, bringing with them a silent and unrelenting prisoner.

"I say," the officer called excitedly in advance, "here's something uncommon run. It's a woman, you know."

"Ah!" said Labertouche, and "Ah!" said Amber, with a click of his teeth, while the woman on his arm clung to him, shivering.

"I thought we'd better bring her in, for she's a lady," said Rowan, looking back at the girl.

"What you and the lady back to the boat, and the white pack back to the water on this side. Two of the men are just getting on the boat, and we're waiting for the other two just now with this—"

"The boat?" said Amber, and he got startled. But the woman, shrugging, said, "Amber—the boat—by George, it's too ridiculous!"

"I have mistaken thought that it was a boat," said Amber, and he was interrupted by the officer of the guard